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OPERATIONAL ART IN THE SUCCESS OF THE MALAYAN COUNTERINSURGENCY CAMPAIGN

by

James Robert Mallette, Jr.
LCDR, USN

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15.Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: in operational art terms, why was the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign successful? The following facets of operational art are examined in relation to this: critical factors for both the insurgents and the British; operational intelligence of the British; operational command and control of the British; and the desired end-state of the British. It is concluded that the "Briggs Plan," which was implemented in 1950, was the main source of the British success. It contained an intuitive appreciation of critical factors, operational intelligence and operational command and control. The guarantee of Malayan independence also played a large part in the British success. Finally, a warning is given that this paper does not give a prescription for success in counterinsurgency. It only gives a method of analyzing the problem of counterinsurgency which may lead to success.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Between 1948 and 1960 the British prosecuted a counterinsurgency campaign against the Malayan Communist Party(MCP), which was attempting to overthrow the legitimate government of the British colony of Malaya. This campaign, which will be called the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign for the purpose of this paper, was successful in that it preserved the legitimacy of the government of the British colony and eventually allowed the British government to grant Malaya independence under terms favorable to both the Malayans and the British.

The purpose of this paper is to answer the question: in operational art terms, why was the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign successful? In answering this question, it does not prescribe a solution for winning all counterinsurgency campaigns. Each case is unique. No "school" solution to the problem of insurgency exists. Even in Malaysia itself, a new insurgency arose in the 1970's to counteract which the government, now independent, tried to apply the lessons the British successfully used in the 1950's. The attempt met with only limited success because of developments in the region which had changed the situation.[1] Instead,

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[1]J. Clementson, "Malaysia in the Seventies: Communist Resurgence and Government Response," *RUSI Journal* 124 (December 1979): 51.

this paper shows that the analysis inherent in the use of operational art can be applied to insurgencies as well as in war. It also shows that the application of operational art in future insurgencies may even lead to success similar to the British experience in Malaya.

Operational art is an analytical approach to war, a way to plan and execute major operations and campaigns. It has many facets, from the factors of time, space and forces to the functions of intelligence, fires, logistics and protection. These facets are important in insurgencies as well as in war. Not all, however, played a critical role in the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign. This paper, therefore, examines the most important ones in determining the success of the British in the campaign. They are: critical factors, including critical strengths, critical weaknesses, critical vulnerabilities and center of gravity of both the insurgents and the British; operational intelligence of the British; operational command and control of the British; and the desired end-state of the British. Before these are examined, however, a review of the history of the insurgency is required as well as the British strategic situation in the 1940's and 1950's.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND STRATEGIC SETTING

The MCP was founded in 1930. From the beginning it was mostly made up

of the ethnic Chinese minority in Malaya, never gaining much popular support from either the Indian or Malay elements of the polyglot Malayan society.[2] During the 1930's, it was mostly involved in labor unrest directed against the colonial government of Malaya. After 1937, the rising threat from Japan caused a shift in MCP policies toward national as opposed to strictly labor issues. During the Japanese occupation of Malaya in World War II, the MCP formed the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA). It won official recognition from the British as the foremost resistance organization behind the Japanese lines in Malaya. The Japanese surrendered, however, before any large-scale fighting occurred. Even though estimates of the MPAJA's military efforts varied widely, in the final analysis they did not rank very highly in offensive action as compared to other Asian guerrilla groups.[3]

In September 1945, after the Japanese surrender, the British returned to Malaya. The MPAJA disbanded after negotiations with the British, who convinced

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[2]"According to the census of 1947, Malaya...had a population of 6.000,000. Of this number the Chinese constituted the largest racial group, accounting for nearly 45 percent of the total....The indigenous Malays...totaled slightly less than the Chinese. Indians, including Pakistanis, represented the third largest group, accounting for slightly over 10 percent of the total population." A. Vandenbosch, "Malaya: The Chinese and Hindu Problems," *Current History* 23 (August 1952): 81.

[3]R.W. Komer, *The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort*, (Santa Monica: Rand, 1972), 1-4, A Report prepared for the Advanced Research Projects Agency, R-957-ARPA.

its members that disarmament offered a better future than returning to the jungle to continue a guerrilla war. The MCP, however, replaced it with a number of front organizations in traditional Communist style. Between 1945 and 1948, the MCP, legalized as of 1945, returned to labor unrest and strikes in an attempt to bring down the colonial government. It also added terror to its repertoire, mostly against those involved in Malaya's critical rubber and tin industries. Sometime before February 1948, the MCP decided to move to an open insurgency. It was then declared illegal once again. On June 19, 1948, the colonial government declared a state of emergency under pressure from rubber planters, who were feeling increasingly the effects of the MCP's terrorist acts.

In 1948 and 1949, the MCP, in addition to disrupting the key rubber and tin industries on which Malaya's economy depended, was preparing for a mass uprising of the Malayan people. Documents seized later showed that the MCP intended to declare a Communist Republic of Malaya on August 3, 1948.[4] In 1949, after the uprising did not occur as it had hoped, the MCP withdrew to the jungle to regroup. In late 1949 and 1950, insurgent incidents increased again. The MCP's main aim now was destroying the local government structure through terrorism against the local populace and attacks on local police posts. Between

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[4]Ibid., 4-6.

July 1950 and December 1951, the insurgent incidents reached their highest intensity, with a symbolic high point being the assassination of British High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney in October 1951.[5]

After this, however, the MCP felt increasing pressure from British security forces. It also became apparent that its terrorist acts against civilians were alienating the very people whom it depended on for support. Guerrilla strength and insurgent created incidents dropped precipitously after 1951 while guerrilla casualties increased. By late 1955, when the MCP made overtures for peace, the guerrilla cause was hopeless. The government did not grant an MCP request for legal status, but did offer amnesty. By 1960 the state of emergency was declared over because guerrilla activity had declined to almost nothing.[6] In the meantime, on August 31, 1957, the British colony of Malaya became an independent member of the Commonwealth as the Federation of Malaya.[7]

The British strategic situation after World War II was grave. Great Britain had emerged from the war almost bankrupt, needing large amounts of aid from the United States for postwar recovery. The Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign

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[5]Ibid., 9.

[6]Ibid., 10.

[7]G.P. Dartford, "Malaya: Problems of a Polyglot Society," *Current History* 34 (June 1958): 346.

spanned a period in which there were competing demands on limited British resources: the Berlin Blockade of 1948-1949, the Korean War, the Suez crisis and NATO force commitments, among others.[8] On the other hand, Malaya was the single largest dollar earner in the shrinking British Empire. Since the war, the Malayan economy had been operating at a high level due to the sharp demand for its two principal exports: rubber and tin.[9] Therefore, even though British commitments elsewhere were great, Malaya was of prime economic importance to the health of Great Britain.

With this historic background and strategic setting, an analysis of the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign in operational art terms can begin. First, the critical factors of both the British and insurgents are examined.

III. CRITICAL FACTORS

Critical factors are arguably the most important facet of operational art. Without an appreciation for them, a major operation or campaign is rudderless. Their correct identification points toward an objective which must be attained for success. The critical factors are made up of critical strengths, critical weaknesses,

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[8]Komer, 14.

[9]Vandenbosch, 81.

critical vulnerabilities and the center of gravity. The center of gravity is that critical strength which when defeated brings ultimate victory over the enemy. These critical factors must be identified both for friendly and enemy forces to successfully protect and successfully defeat those factors that are important to victory. Finally, by definition, a campaign, such as the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign, must have a strategic objective. Therefore, the critical factors of such a campaign are strategic in nature.

No indication exists that the British formally applied operational art to the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign. They intuitively understood, however, what the insurgents' center of gravity was and how to defeat it. That was one of their keys to success. The MCP guerrilla army was the insurgents' center of gravity. The support from among the Chinese minority in Malaya was a critical strength and a critical vulnerability for the insurgents. The lack of support from the indigenous Malays and Indians was a critical weakness and also a critical vulnerability.

To attack the insurgents' center of gravity, the British separated the insurgents from their support among the Chinese minority and used jungle sweeps by small army units to kill or capture the guerrillas. The main source of MCP support was a group of half a million Chinese who were squatters on land along

the jungle fringe. They were victims of postwar economic dislocation whose disaffection the MCP initially used to its advantage.[10] To counteract this support, on 28 May 1949, the government began to resettle the squatters and clean up the squatter areas. The resettlements were called "new villages." The resettled squatters were given land, material to build houses, free medical and health services, free schooling for their children, among other things. Most important, they were given adequate protection from terrorism, which the MCP was increasingly directing against the local population. The squatters were gradually convinced, despite MCP propaganda to the contrary, that their support for the MCP was unjustified.[11]

In conjunction with this program, British, Commonwealth and Malayan forces began to sweep the jungle for guerrilla forces. At first, large units were used without success. These tactics were changed to the use of smaller units, which yielded better results. Cut off from their main source of support and gradually attrited, guerrilla numbers shrank from 12,000 in 1948 to 2,000 in 1957.[12]

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[10]"Some 70 percent of total guerrilla strength...reportedly came from the laborers and squatters along the jungle fringe." Komer, 7.

[11]C.C. Too, "Defeating Communism in Malaya," *Military Review* 47 (August 1967): 87-89.

[12]Komer, 10.

Finally, also contributing to the British success in Malaya, the insurgents were unable to successfully attack the British center of gravity: the will to remain in Malaya and give the Malayans independence on their own terms. The insurgents attempted to terrorize those associated with the rubber and tin industries. The British and Malayan ties, however, were strong, the British having been in Malaya since 1786.[13] Also, the Malayan natural resources of tin and rubber were economically important to Great Britain. Therefore, even though the British had the critical weaknesses of a weak economy after World War II and a large number of other commitments throughout the world, they were willing to commit enough resources for a long enough period of time to defeat the MCP in Malaya.

The intuitive understanding of critical factors alone did not achieve success for the British in Malaya. Next, the contributions of operational intelligence and operational command and control are discussed.

IV. OPERATIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND COMMAND AND CONTROL

Good operational intelligence is the capability to know the enemy. If the enemy's capabilities and even some of its thought processes are known, defeating it

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[13]Dartford, 346.

is that much easier. Good command and control is the capability to apply friendly forces when and where required. Good operational intelligence and good command and control coupled with an appreciation for critical factors are a tough combination to overcome. At the beginning of the prosecution of the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign, however, the British had neither good operational intelligence nor good command and control. Fortunately for the British, as the campaign wore on, they developed both.

At the beginning of the campaign the British neither appreciated the significance of intelligence nor how to get it. In August 1948, the Special Branch was established as part of the Malayan police to help solve these problems. Intelligence was hit and miss at first. Little was known about the MCP order of battle or command structure. Chinese linguists were lacking, which prevented the Special Branch from developing information in the clannish Chinese community. Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs, appointed Director of Operations under the High Commissioner for Malaya in 1950, recognized the importance of operational intelligence and strengthened the Special Branch staff at all levels. But there were still some lingering problems. General Sir Gerald Templer, who assumed the combined posts of High Commissioner and Director of Operations after the assassination of Sir Henry Gurney in February 1952, gave intelligence first

priority. Special Branch was reorganized and given primary responsibility for intelligence on the insurgents. The intelligence roles of the military and the Special Branch were clearly delimited which had not been the case before.[14]

The Special Branch received any military generated raw intelligence and any prisoners or defectors for exploitation. Military operations were frequently designed specifically to generate intelligence by driving MCP guerrillas into areas where the Special Branch had already established agents. Weekly intelligence summaries grew progressively more detailed with each success. By 1957 the Special Branch had a dossier on nearly all of the remaining guerrillas.[15]

This intelligence gathering was facilitated by the utilization of captured or defected insurgents for information. Many were successfully turned into agents and informers. In 1953, a volunteer force of SEP's, or surrendered enemy personnel, was formed to operate with Special Branch or military units.[16]

Most of the success of operational intelligence during the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign came from a tightening of the intelligence command structure. This ultimately relied on the success of British operational command

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[14]Komer, 42-43.

[15]Ibid., 44-45.

[16]Komer, 45; R. L. Clutterbuck, "The SEP -- Guerrilla Intelligence Source," *Military Review* 42 (October 1962): 13-21.

and control during the campaign. Similar to operational intelligence, however, British operational command and control was not a success at first. The two men who changed that were the aforementioned Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs and General Sir Gerald Templer.

Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs arrived in Malaya in April 1950 and was assigned as Director of Operations for the High Commissioner. The management and operations framework which he developed, called the "Briggs Plan", lasted throughout the rest of the campaign. The "Briggs Plan" had four elements: separate the guerillas from the people, formalize and strengthen the counterinsurgency management system, strengthen intelligence as the key to antiguerrilla operations, deploy security forces on a primarily territorial basis.[17]

The implementation of these elements marked a turning point for the campaign. The importance of separating the guerrillas from the people and of strengthening intelligence has already been discussed. The implementation of these elements, however, ultimately depended on the command and control structure which the "Briggs Plan" put in place. One observer said that General Briggs brought "joint thinking" to the direction of the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign. Another said that he brought about "a new alignment, a new

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[17]Komer, 19.

integration of the Army, and the Police with the civil administration."[18] Yet, there was initially a flaw in the "Briggs Plan": General Briggs lacked command authority over both the military and the civilian police. He had to refer decisions to the High Commissioner through a civilian Chief Secretary. The civil authorities often seemed to feel that no revolt existed. A business as usual attitude existed. Therefore, coordination with them was difficult. Also, no important decision could be executed until approved by thirteen different civilian governments, including the government of Great Britain.[19]

The appointment of General Templer as combined High Commissioner and Director of Operations in 1952 strengthened the "Briggs Plan" framework immensely. He was in charge of both civil authorities and the military. A divided command became unified. He issued a short directive during his first days in office:

> "Any idea that the business of normal civil government and the business of the Emergency are two separate entities must be killed for good and for all. The two activities are completely and utterly interrelated."[20]

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[18]Ibid., 27.

[19]Ibid., 29.

[20]Ibid., 31.

From the "Briggs Plan", came the strengthening of operational intelligence, the appreciation of separating the insurgents from their main source of support, and finally a strengthened operational command and control structure. The keys to the British success sprang from this framework. But, one other key must be discussed. That key is the desired end state which the British had for Malaya, its independence as part of the Commonwealth.

V. DESIRED END-STATE

It is important to have an expectation of what will exist after a campaign or major operation is successfully completed. The desired end-state is an ultimate goal. Those who do not plan for it may be pulled into something beyond what was expected at the beginning.

From the beginning of the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign, Great Britain intended to eventually grant Malaya its independence. In fact, the British government had already created the Malayan Union in 1946 to enfranchise the entire population and reduce the autocratic powers of the colonial government. This plan, however, was resented by the native Malays because it gave too much power to the Chinese, the Indians and other ethnic groups.[21] The problems were

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[21]Vandenbosch, 82.

resolved by 1948 when the Federation of Malaya was formed. The Federation called for greater democratization but did not go as far as the Malayan Union.[22]

Against this background, the MCP was unable to appeal to a drive for independence by the Malayans with the MCP in control. The insurgency, however, was an irritation which diverted resources away from projects intended to facilitate a transition to Malayan independence. Yet, the success of the counterinsurgency campaign allowed the transition to continue. Finally, on 31 August, 1957, the Malayan Constitution was enacted.[23]

A vision of the future for the Malayans gave the British a purpose. That, along with the other facets of operational art discussed earlier, led to the successful prosecution of the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign is an example of a successful counterinsurgency. Its success emanated from the implementation of the "Briggs Plan" in 1950. The three elements of the "Briggs Plan" discussed in this paper show an intuitive appreciation of operational art by its creator. Lieutenant General

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[22]Vandenbosch, 82; Dartford, 348.

[23]Dartfod, 348-349; Komer, 13.

Sir Harold Briggs understood the importance of critical factors, operational intelligence, and operational command and control to the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign. The guarantee of Malayan independence by the British was also important to the campaign's success.

The success of future counterinsurgency campaigns depends on a similar appreciation of operational art. This appreciation will be more formal than intuitive due to the application of operational art in current military doctrine, especially in the United States military's joint doctrine. The particular facets of operational art important to the Malayan Counterinsurgency Campaign, however, may not be important in future counterinsurgencies. That is why this paper does not present a prescription for success. It only presents a method by which success may be attained.

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